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Rep. Zach Wamp figures he's given about 1,700 tours of the Capitol since coming to Congress in 1995, and he's heard some crazy stuff along the way — not so much from tourists as from the other amateur tour guides.

"I listened to a lot of staff-led tours over the years," Wamp says, "and many of them were laughable."

All that was supposed to change in December, when the \$621 million Capitol Visitor Center opened and a new wave of rigorously trained professional guides started giving tours.

But has it?

Over the course of two days this month, POLITICO tagged along anonymously on five tours led by five different CVC guides. What we found: While almost all of the information conveyed was factually accurate, the behavior of some of the tour guides and the quality of their tours were erratic. Two of the tour guides were engaging and informative, two others offered tours that were rushed or uninformative, and a fifth guide behaved boorishly.

The CVC tours average about an hour — including a 13-minute introductory movie — and usually include the Rotunda, the Crypt, the old Supreme Court, and National Statuary Hall, the early home of the House of Representatives.

The facts and stories provided on the tours are mostly prepackaged, the result of the training the professional guides are given. But the best guides peppered the preplanned tour with additional facts and drama: stories of bloody fights on the floor of the early House of Representatives and how Capitol artist Constantino Brumidi nearly fell to his death while painting the high walls of the dome.

Another could name each of the dozens of statues in Statuary Hall.

But the tour experience wasn't always so pleasant.

At the beginning of one tour, two CVC employees openly quarreled with one another over what time it should start. "I love my job; I love my co-workers," one of them sarcastically told the waiting crowd.

On another tour, a guide demanded that a shy elementary-school-age girl answer questions about American history — and kept demanding answers even as the girl, obviously upset, tried to hide behind her mother.

Another guide moved so quickly that even high school students struggled to catch up.

The guide admonished the group not to "wander around blindly" and threatened unspecified consequences "if the group does not follow those guidelines."

Several of the guides seemed harried and burned out. One complained openly to the tourists that the center was "severely under-staffed" — and then cut the post--movie part of the tour to under 20 minutes.

When asked why the tour was cut short, he advised guests to "come back on one of our nonbusy days, not the spring or summer."

CVC officials say the center is one guide shy of being completely staffed at 60 guides. A college degree is required, and the starting salary for 8½ hours per day is \$33,000 per year.

Some of the tours were marred by technical issues.

At the beginning of each tour, visitors are given headsets to help them hear their guides in the echo and din of the Capitol. On three of the five tours, the headsets POLITICO received had either dead batteries at the start of the tour or batteries that died midtour.

On one tour, an elderly woman wearing hearing aids told the guide that her headset batteries had died. “I’m sorry, ma’am,” he snapped. “There’s nothing I can do about that.”

Asked about that incident, CVC spokesman Tom Fontana said, “If it occurred, it was inappropriate behavior.” Fontana said that tour guides tell their charges to test their headsets before the tours begin.

Fontana said the CVC has worked hard to improve the tours visitors get. In its training sessions for guides, the CVC tries to dispel some favorite Capitol myths: No, the Statue of Liberty couldn’t really fit in the Rotunda — at least not with its pedestal attached. And no, John Quincy Adams didn’t really use an acoustic phenomenon in the old Hall of Representatives to listen in on his opponents while pretending to be asleep — even though a guide on one of the tours we joined passed along the story as fact.

“I hate that story,” said Anthony Wallis, a research analyst with the Office of the Historian. “We are really trying our best to correct it, but some people still aren’t getting it.”

Says Fontana: “Our guides are trained in gracious hospitality. With any kind of museum of this size, there’s a two-to-three-year test-and-adjust period. As we learn more lessons, we’ll continue to modify policies.”

Some members of Congress aren’t so patient.

“What’s frustrating is that [Visitor Services CEO] Terrie Rouse has maintained and represented

that these are professionally gold-standard tours,” said House Appropriations Legislative Branch Subcommittee Chairwoman Debbie Wasserman Schultz (D-Fla.), who plans to hold a hearing on problems at the CVC.

Earlier this month, Rep. Mark Kirk (R-Ill.) sent a letter — signed by 50 other members — to the architect of the Capitol to complain that the crowded tour center is hindering members’ staffers from leading their own constituent tours — and that the training provided to them by the CVC is long and inconvenient.

“We’ve unfortunately witnessed the creation of a huge bureaucracy that is now saying our own staff can’t lead constituents on tours,” he said, adding that he’s already had to turn down tour requests from 10 people.

Making matters worse, tensions between Hill staffers — who have traditionally led Capitol tours — and the new, red-coated CVC guides have played out in public. As Roll Call has reported, one tour guide’s Facebook page became a battleground between the competing guides: After a staffer complained to him that the CVC guides were “rude and unprofessional,” the guide charged that staffers “spread misinformation about the Capitol, its rich history and the people who really make it work as well as it does.”

Taking a stab at high-on-themselves Hill staffers, the guide added: “Once you understand that on Capitol Hill, you are nothing, we can all move on with our business.”